

"There's so much powder," giggled Sam (left), with guides Yusuf and Fayaz

SNOWBOARDING IN KASHMIR IS NOT FOR THE FAINT-HEARTED. BUT IT IS FOR ANYONE WITH A THIRST FOR UNLIMITED POWDER AND ADVENTURE, AS SAM BALDWIN FOUND OUT WHILE DODGING THE BORDER PATROL

MONKEYS AND MACHINE GUNS



MACHINE GUNS

The scent of wood smoke hangs in the air as we trudge down to the gondola, avoiding the perils of barbed wire and feral dogs. From our rustic hotel, the Pine Palace, where hot water and electricity are never guaranteed, we pass monkeys stripping bark from pine branches and three children dressed in pastel shawls. Two soldiers stand with semi-automatic rifles slung over their backs and eye us inquisitively. We throw them the local greeting: "Salam aleikum!" (May peace be with you). "Wa-aleikum-as-salam!" (and also with you) they reply, with smiles on their faces.

It's always good to befriend the guys with guns. Monkeys and machine-guns aren't what you'd normally find in a resort, but then we're in the Himalaya and this is Kashmir, not Kitzbühel.

Bullets and bombings

Rewind six months. I'm trying to convince my friends a trip to Kashmir, a region hotly contested by neighbouring India and Pakistan, long troubled by bombings, bullets and beheadings, and still listed as a no-go zone by the British Foreign & Commonwealth Office, is really a good idea.

Initial interest was strong, but as we dug deeper into the complex politics, discovering that grenade attacks in some parts of Kashmir ▶



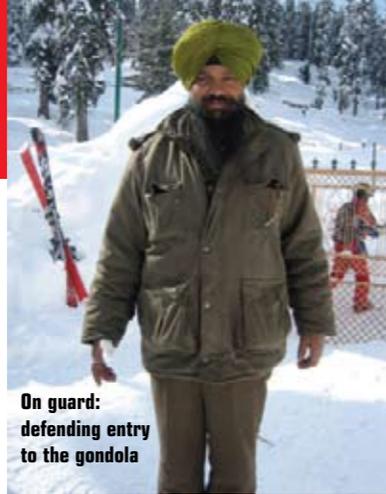
Left: A priceless turn
Clockwise from above: A monkey! In the snow!; Coke, it gets everywhere; Looking lively; Kashmir – does what it says on the tin

photography: ben capewell and sam baldwin

Valley are an almost daily occurrence, numbers began to dwindle. Soon, we were left with just seven of us, advanced adventurous boarders who decided that the chance to ride Himalayan powder was worth the small risk of getting caught up in militant violence. Other friends thought it a completely stupid and unnecessary risk, and didn't understand why we didn't just go to France instead.

It was a question I began to ask myself with increasing frequency as the trip loomed closer. I wondered if I was leading six of my friends to an untimely death in the name of macho adventurism. But then reality struck back – was Kashmir really any more dangerous than anywhere else that has suffered terrorism in its recent past, including my home country and much of Europe?

It's all about perception; despite active terrorist groups operating in Spain, few Brits would think twice about travelling there. Yet because Kashmir is a far away land in a distant realm, we fear it more greatly than perhaps we should.



On guard: defending entry to the gondola



The Pine Palace hotel – irregular hot water but delicious curries

Gulmarg's powder paradise

The lone gondola in Gulmarg, which is the highest in the world, takes skiers 1330 vertical metres up the glorious Mount Apharwat to 3980m. The lower half of the mountain offers just one gentle, flatish, groomed piste that passes through ancient, majestic pine trees. Most of the time, this part of the mountain is empty; it's the largely treeless upper half of the mountain that people travel so far to ride.

"I don't cross lines" was the mantra of one American skier we met on the

miles of deep, light, untracked crystals to blast into Indian airspace.

Down days

But Kashmir isn't always easy. As David Watson, an experienced mountaineer who trains local guides, explained, "Kashmir is full of frustrations for the foreigner: inconsistent water supplies, frequent power cuts and infuriating inefficiency. But when the snow is on, it's on. In Alaska, untracked powder runs like this would cost you \$250 a shot because you'd need a chopper to access such remote terrain. Here in Gulmarg, the same bottomless powder costs just 250 rupees (\$6) – and you just jump on the gondola to get it."

The problem is that the gondola isn't always running. For reasons never explained, the upper phase frequently opens late, or sometimes not at all. But on days when poor conditions or Kashmiri inefficiency prevented the gondola from opening, we experienced a new thrill – Tata Sumo snowboarding. Driving in the Indian equivalent of a Land Rover to access the slopes below Gulmarg, this was Kashmiri heliskiing, minus the chopper.

The village of Tangmarg sits below Gulmarg and there are many routes down to it through mighty snow-laden

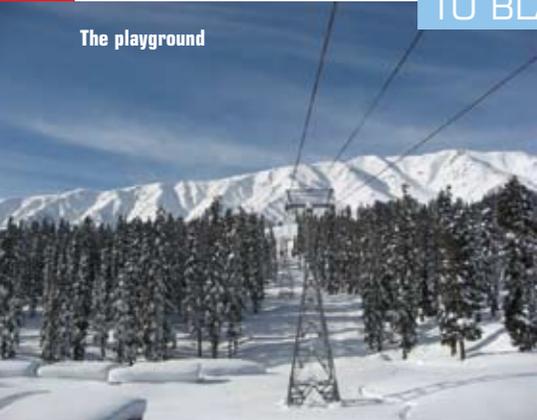
WE HAD NO PROBLEM FINDING MILES OF DEEP, LIGHT, UNTRACKED CRYSTALS TO BLAST INTO INDIAN AIRSPACE

lift. In Gulmarg, he probably wouldn't have to. The reason people are willing to brave the threat of Delhi belly, powercuts and snow leopards is the vast abundance of Kashmiri powder, and the distinct lack of people to share it with. On the busiest day of our stay, a head count at the gondola showed less than 200 skiers and boarders waiting to board. In an area the size of Gulmarg, that is only limited by how far you're prepared to hike, that translates as near-empty slopes, and we had no problem finding

An audience of soldiers look on from the Line of Control, Kashmir's border Below l-r: Open all hours, in all elements; Small queue, vast terrain; Getting a kick from the snow, anyhow



The playground



Looking towards the world's ninth highest mountain Left: feeling good

forests. Faroq, our driver, would drop us off at the top of a steep wooded slope and our guide from Kashmir Powdercats, Fayeaz would lead us down through silent snowy woods, to be

picked up where the forest spat us out, only to do it all over again. As I glided through the ancient pines I could hear the ghostly Muslim call to prayer, whispering through the trees from the valley below us. Another reminder that we were in a land far more mystical than Val d'Isère.

It's a good thing the snow is so good because you don't come to Gulmarg for the après nightlife. There are no bars, no pubs and no clubs. As a Muslim region, alcohol is not sold openly, though locals have arrangements with the military base and obtain supplies which they sell on to foreign guests, creating a profitable sideline. The nightlife is low-key – a hearty Kashmiri curry, a game of cards, and talk of what tomorrow may bring, around the *Bakari*, a pot-bellied wooden stove, that heat many of the rooms in Gulmarg.

Powderhounds and powdercats

Word of this "heavenly paradise", as faded 70s tourist brochures call it, is spreading rapidly to the world's ski community. But the recent surge in popularity of Gulmarg is largely down to the Australian entrepreneur Peter Robinson. He founded the company Ski Himalaya in 2005 after visiting the area in 1999 and realising its massive potential as a ski resort.

NIGHTLIFE IS LOW-KEY – A HEARTY KASHMIRI CURRY AND TALK OF TOMORROW

Adventurous 30-something Americans, Australians wanting a cheap winter season, and globetrotting Europeans make up the bulk of the visitors, with Russians also providing a sizeable proportion of the clientele.

A handful of local Kashmiris can also be seen on skis, though most are working as guides rather than skiing for recreation. Like many, our guide Fayeaz's background in skiing is with the army, training for winter warfare, and now makes most of his money during the winter as a guide. Gulmarg is also starting to attract more domestic tourists, though few are here to ski. The majority settle for a sledge ride, a few photos and the novelty of experiencing snow for the first time.

Nuclear neighbours

In an area that has seen so few foreign visitors over the last decade, the return of the tourists is welcome, boosting Kashmir's economy and providing employment for locals. There are plans to construct a new chairlift as part of ongoing expansions to the area, which has the snowfall and terrain to rival world-class resorts like Whistler – as long as it remains politically stable.

For now, the strong military presence of the Indian army is a permanent fixture; troops line the roads and man machine-gun turrets in their armoured vehicles as they rattle past the wooden shops and houses. With a volatile and heavily armed Line of Control border between nuclear neighbours Pakistan and India, it could be a long while before the army leave, and until they do, Gulmarg won't be appearing in your typical tour ops' brochure anytime soon.

But for the globe trotting snow lover, it's all part of Gulmarg's allure – a little slice of visible danger that adds to the thrill of Kashmir, and for those who want genuine adventure and are willing to tackle the hardships of travelling in India, Gulmarg will richly reward you with incredible powder, fascinating and friendly locals, and natural beauty of Himalayan proportions. 



He went to Kashmir with SkiHimalaya, which offers a two-week trip as well as more bespoke trips. For more info, visit www.skihimalaya.com. For current Foreign Office recommendations, visit www.fco.gov.uk.



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